

“Good ol’ Biblical Cherry-pickin”

Author’s note: Originally written for my newspaper column, I thought this brief essay may better serve as a good fruitbasket for some in the secular community to chew on.

Reading another atheist criticizing believers for “cherry-picking” selected passages from the Bible, I offered this response: “Some cherries might be good to pick.” I followed this with, “By their fruits you shall know them.”

Both extreme atheists and extreme theists “cherry-pick” books, passages, verses or words, selecting according to their taste, or what they find distasteful. Then they often turn around and “cherry-pick”—or throw their own cherry *pits*—back at the one on the other side of the orchard.

Can’t we all just eat cherries? A flippant, simplistic response, yet I think we can choose something better—and less messy—than fruit fights, don’t you think?

Pretty much all Bible-believers (in Christian circles I make a distinction between “Bible followers” and “followers of Jesus”) have their own chosen and cherished stories or verses. Oftentimes these special selections support the beliefs one already has, either instilled from Sunday school or Sunday sermons. A good example would be verses such as, “He gave himself for me.” A whole tree of theology grew up around these passages, one that stressed that the whole message of the Bible is a “salvation story”—a dramatic (and terrifying) epic of slavery to sin, sacrifice, and a promise of a golden city in the sky where the “redeemed” can spend forever looking down on the eternal suffering of the unsaved. Bitter fruit indeed.

Others choose to mark the “best parts” as personal morality. For instance, “keep yourself unstained by the world.” Yet other people of faith are guided more by the first part of the same verse: “Pure religion is to care for orphans and widows.” They view the Bible as a positive story of freedom, justice, mercy and love, rather than divisive judgement.

Yet other believers choose to focus attention on the Psalms and Proverbs, the poetic and prayerful parts. These folks don’t get quite so agitated about who’s a member or “true Christian” and who’s not. They use biblical teachings as helps for their devotional life. Of course, they may skip over passages on judgment and punishment—wink, wink. Called on this, many are quick to admit they enjoy the sweet rather than bitter bits and bites.

Earlier I made a statement a reader may find puzzling, making a distinction between those who call themselves “followers of Jesus” and “Bible-believers.” I’ve always been

a bit unsure what people mean with both labels (I was both at one time or another), but experience tells me it's good to ask for some explanation.

When one person says they believe or follow the Bible, my first thought is: how can you believe or follow a *book*? Seriously, it's a book before it's a "holy book." Responses range from "the Bible is God's Word so I believe every word" to "the essence of the Bible is love and goodness so I try to practice that." The tense history of religion has been marked by the tug-of-war over scriptures, so it's best to know how someone uses the writings.

It's also informative to find out how and where someone has read or studied the Bible. As I see it, poor religious education can be blamed for the quality of fruit picked and presented.

Many atheists who were once believers know the Bible upside down and backward—and some have had their fill "eating the scrolls" (remember Ezekiel munching the honey-flavored scroll?). Yet even some of the scripture-saturated pick out all the stuff they reject (if they haven't tossed the whole thing in the garbage) to assault the faithful with: "What about THIS! How can you believe THAT?" I'm not much interested in these cherry-throwing contests.

On the other hand, many believers, mostly the "apologists" (defenders of faith), grab a pearl and throw it at the infidel swine (now there's a twist on the gospel). These folks seem a little too fearfully defensive to me, easily provoked, easily choked on too many cherries.

What might Jesus himself say about all this cherry-chucking? Bible-believers threw plenty of pithy pits at the Nazarene preacher and he could toss a few back. But mostly, as I read it, he was much more interested in the ethics of his followers than in their ability to use ancient scriptures as godly grenades.

The Bible battles weaponizing "The Word" (or any scriptures) are the best arguments for putting the books up on the shelves for a while, to take a long look at what we've allowed "inspired ink" in gold-tinged leather books to do to the human family (I often wonder whether any faith would long survive in the absence of a "reference manual").

What are the "best" passages from my point of view? A few of my favorite juicy slices, from both Hebrew and Christian baskets:

"Love your neighbor as yourself." (of course)

"Seek wisdom." (always sound advice)

"Let justice roll down like waters." (reminding us it's not all about wordgames)

"Do to others what you want them to do to you." (of course, again)

“The river of the water of life flows from [the Great Living Temple], on either side grows the tree of life.” (I just like the natural images, though this appears at the end of The Revelation)

More cherry-picking, isn't it? Whatever we pick from the trees of truth—sacred or secular—I have to ask: does it nourish and flourish in both body and brain? Does it make us better people? Are we more compassionate, loving?

As I well remember from Greek studies, “pan dendron agathon, karpous kalous poiei” (an appropriately poetic message: “Every good tree bears good fruit”).

Maybe it would be best to share the juice, bake pies, tend the trees together. Although, not everyone likes cherries—or sharing.

So maybe it's time to pause the picking. There are other orchards, with other fruit, that haven't even been found yet.

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